DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 416 161 SO 028 222

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TITLE	Media Literacy in Social Studies Teacher Education: Relating Meaning to Practice.
PUB DATE	1997-00-00
NOTE	24p.; Paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Higher Education; Mass Media Role; *Media Research; Preservice Teacher Education; Secondary Education; *Social Studies; Statistical Analysis; *Teacher Education
IDENTIFIERS	*Media Literacy; Ohio

ABSTRACT

This study reports on a survey of secondary social studies teacher educators to find out how they define media literacy and what aspects of their definitions they address in their social studies methods classes. Accepted definitions include media literacy as technical understanding and media literacy as critical theory. The questionnaire consisted of brief descriptions of 10 media literacy competencies. Respondents were to indicate which combination of these competencies best defined media literacy for them and which of these competencies were taught in their respective methods classes. The questionnaire was mailed to each of the 47 higher education institutions in Ohio that offered a secondary social studies teacher education program of degrees with certification in secondary social studies. Forty responses indicated considerable overlap between the two definitional categories of media literacy from which the key competencies were drawn. Media literacy as technical understanding was the primary definitional category identified by respondents. (EH)

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Media Literacy in Social Studies Teacher Education: Relating Meaning to Practice

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A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Chicago, Illinois, March 25, 1997.

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Media Literacy in Social Studies Teacher Education: Relating Meaning to Practice

Introduction

Understanding the influence of mass media on our increasingly complex lives has long been central to the social studies teacher's mission, with particular regard to the core element of citizenship development (e.g., Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Griffin, 1992; Remy, 1980). Along with this understanding comes a reason for teachers to cultivate in students a literacy about mass media and how they complicate and facilitate our role as citizens.

Given this charge, how are preservice social studies teachers prepared to address media literacy with their future students? In order to explore this question, we surveyed a sample of secondary social studies teacher educators with two overarching questions in mind. First, how do social studies teacher educators define media literacy? Second, what aspects of their definitions, if any, do they address in their social studies methods classes?

Rationale for This Study

If one defines mass media as all vehicles used to communicate with the public, then mass media grow with every new, publicly accessible medium (Masterman, 1985). In addition to television, radio, magazines, newspapers, and books (Splaine, 1991), mass media now include access to the Internet, myriad computer programs, and video rentals. This seemingly constant growth increases mass media's potential influence on the variety of opinions and on the amount and type of information to which we are exposed. As such, mass media affect the decision-making processes essential to our lives as citizens in a democratic society. Our ability to consume mass media, with a discriminating appetite for relevance

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and accuracy, is therefore an essential part of citizenship (Postman, 1992; 1995). Television is a case in point.

A recent Senate report of the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation noted that "children spend, on average, 28 hours per week watching television [per year], which is more time than they spend in school [per year]" (S. Rep. No. 171, 1995, p. 2). Recent studies corroborate this claim (Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1993a; Nielsen Media Research, 1993; Simpson & Catanese, 1994; Sweet, D., & Singh, R., 1994). Additionally, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (1993b) estimated that 40% of American precollegiate students view television programs or educational videos in school at least once a week, and the primary source for news and current events in this age group is the television (75%). Nielsen Media Research (1993) indicated that 77% of American households own video cassette recorders, leading to the possibility that students consume additional hours of television on a delayed basis.

The power of this medium to influence student perceptions is remarkable. In summarizing studies of retention and comprehension via television, Adams and Hamm (1989) noted that "children tend to comprehend more of what they see on television than what they read or hear on the radio (or audiotape)--and they remember it longer" (p. 29). The overwhelming influence of television alone on the perceptions of students indicates a need for social studies educators to assist students in developing a sense of media literacy--a literacy intended to sort out the explosion of accessible media technology and the information viewed, heard, and read on a daily basis as a result of this technology. This study centered on describing how social studies teacher educators defined the concept of media literacy and to what extent this concept was addressed in the preparation of secondary social studies teachers.

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Definitions of Media Literacy

Although defined variously, a review of the literature on media literacy indicated two distinct definitions relevant to the social studies educator. Offered for consideration by our sample, these definitions included media literacy as technical understanding and media literacy as critical theory.

Media Literacy as Technical Understanding

Media literacy as technical understanding encompasses a teacher's ability to use mass media as an alternative to common sources of information such as a lecture or textbook reading. This competency requires the teacher to be media literate in a technological way. The rationale behind this belief is to enable a teacher to "provide a livelier and more interesting classroom environment for her [*sic*] students" (Masterman, 1985, p. 65). Heinich (1984) argued that teachers should be taught to change instruction from a craft to a technology, thereby implying technological mastery over mass media as an important skill for teaching.

Advocates of media literacy as technical understanding believe that teachers, when harnessing a mass medium's technology for classroom use, should also teach students the basic skills of production. The underlying assumption is that students, by becoming literate in a mass medium's technology, will understand better the role of the broadcaster, computer programmer, or film director and crew. By learning such skills, students can produce media products for consumption by their classmates based upon the material being studied (Collins, 1974). Additionally, Baron (1985) noted that students engaged in producing a community access video learned not only the technical literacy needed to accomplish this goal, but they also learned the process of getting their productions on local access cable television.

In the social studies classroom, technical understanding can foster citizenship through group participation and civic action (National Council for the Social

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Studies, 1994). For instance, students engaged in a unit on local government could video tape and edit a city council meeting using a broadcast format complete with a student news commentator. This video could then be used in class as a springboard for planning a course of action and its eventual implementation on a public issue of concern to the local community.

Media Literacy as Critical Theory

A critical theoretic orientation toward mass media "focuses on underlying root interests, root assumptions, and root approaches" (Hlynka, 1991, p. 514). This orientation assumes that all mass media "are involved in a process of constructing or representing reality rather than simply transmitting or reflecting it" (Masterman, 1993, p. 5). Entertainment and marketing are at the heart of mass media when viewed through a critical lens (Melamed, 1989).

Operationalizing a critical theory of mass media involves four major areas of analysis. Masterman (1985) defined them as

> (i) the sources, origins and determinants of media constructions;
>
> (ii) the dominant techniques and codings employed by the media to convince us of the truth of their representations;
>
> (iii) the nature of 'reality' constructed by the media; the values implicit in media representations; and
>
> (iv) the ways in which media construction are read or received by their audiences (p. 21).

Skills required to effect a critical theoretic approach involve the primary step of using mass media as a "text" to be read and critically analyzed. In so doing, a person can apply critical theory to uncover hidden assumptions, to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information, to recognize biases, to separate fact from opinion, and, ultimately, to determine the strength of the mass medium's

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message. Translated into classroom practice, teachers could engage students in a critical dialogue concerning the message of the mass medium under consideration. The goal of this dialogue would be to engage students in dialectical reasoning and to generate critical reflection by the students as they deconstruct the medium's message (Duncan, 1989; O'Reilly & Splaine, 1987; Quin & McMahon, 1993; Splaine & Splaine, 1992).

A critical theoretic approach toward mass media parallels the essential citizenship skill of critical analysis (e.g., Banks, 1990; Beyer, 1985; Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Hunt & Metcalf, 1968). A unit concerning gender issues, for instance, could focus on developing a critical theory of female stereotypes in the mass media. Through a variety of media such as television, newspaper, and radio advertisements; music videos; and commercial television programs, the teacher could introduce the students to female gender roles that, on the surface, seem unremarkable. While viewing, reading, or listening, the students could write a description of common societal views toward women as constructed by the mass media. The ensuing discussion could revolve around mass media's biases, hidden assumptions, and opinions which are presented as unquestioned societal norms about women. Further exercises could include a critically reflective analysis of one night of television viewing with a concentration on problematizing this mass medium's portrayal of women's roles.

As these two categories illustrate, a singular definition of mass media does not exist. However, the aforementioned need to understand mass media's influence on our role as citizens does exist. Consequently, our survey included a list of ten media literacy competencies that operationalized the two definitions. In addition to choosing competencies they believed most closely related to their definitions of media literacy, we asked the sample of secondary social studies teacher educators to

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highlight specifically the competencies they addressed in their preservice methods classes.

Method

As noted previously, the two, *a priori* research questions addressed by this study were: (a) How do social studies teacher educators define media literacy, and (b) what elements of these definitions, if any, do social studies teacher educators address in their social studies methods courses? A third, related research question emerged during the analysis of the response data: Was there an association between a respondent's identification of a particular element of media literacy (i.e., a key competency identified by a respondent as crucial to the definition of media literacy) and the degree to which that element was integrated into that respondent's methods course? In other words, if a respondent identified a particular media literacy competency as essential to his or her understanding of media literacy, did this identification predict that this respondent would also attempt to teach that competency in his or her methods course?

Instrument

In an attempt to answer these research questions, the authors developed a questionnaire designed to elicit each respondent's self-reporting of both the key competencies of media literacy and the degree to which these key competencies were integrated into courses taught by the respondent. The questionnaire (see Appendix) consisted of brief descriptions of ten media literacy competencies. Respondents were asked to indicate which combination of these competencies best defined media literacy for them and which of these key competencies were taught in their respective methods courses.

In addition to the questions concerning media literacy, the questionnaire also requested data from respondents on type of methods course taught (generic/content-

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specific), academic calendar (semester/quarter), highest degree of instructor (Masters, Ed.D., Ph.D.), age of instructor, number of hours the methods course met per week, and the average number of social studies students in the course. These data served to provide more detail on the background of participants and were used to determine whether these background variables were related in any way to the treatment of media literacy in participants' courses.

Table 1

Breakdown of Media Literacy Competencies by Definitional Category

Definitional Category	Resulting Media Literacy Competency
Technical Understanding	Ability to use audio/visual materials through technology
	Ability to produce instructional materials with technology
	Ability to use technology to present information
	Ability to evaluate mass media technically
	Knowledge of latest social studies computer software
Critical Theory	Ability to uncover hidden assumptions in mass media
	Ability to distinguish relevant information in mass media reporting
	Ability to determine point of view or bias of mass media production
	Ability to distinguish fact and opinion in mass media
	Ability to determine strength of argument as presented by mass media

Questions concerning the construct validity of the instrument were addressed in two ways. First, the ten media literacy competencies used in the questionnaire were drawn from the two categorical definitions of media literacy developed from a

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review of the relevant literature. These competencies reflected the key elements of each categorical definition as noted earlier. Table 1 outlines these media literacy competencies by definitional category. Second, a draft of the instrument was reviewed by experts in both the study of media literacy and instrument design and changes suggested by these experts were incorporated into the instrument.

Population

A copy of the questionnaire was mailed to each of the forty-seven institutions of higher education in the state of Ohio that offered a secondary social studies teacher education program or degrees with certification in secondary social studies. The demographics of these institutions are reported in Table 2.

One method for characterizing teacher preparation programs is the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE) degree classification stratum (AACTE, 1992). AACTE classifies its member institutions according to highest degree offered and describes each of the classification stratum as follows:

Stratum 1 Institutions offering only baccalaureate programs in education.

Stratum 2 Institutions offering baccalaureate, master's, and sixth year degree programs in education

Stratum 3 Institutions offering baccalaureate, master's, and sixth year and doctoral degree programs in education

According to data acquired from the United States Department of Education (1994), there are 1,250 institutions, nation-wide, that offer degree programs in teacher education. Of these, 436 (35%) could be classified as Stratum 1, 625 (50%) as Stratum 2 and 189 (15%) as Stratum 3. Table 2 indicates that the distribution of teacher education institutions in Ohio across these AACTE strata was only somewhat incongruous with the national data regarding teacher education programs. While it was true that Ohio's teacher education institutions represent a

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Table 2

Description of Ohio teacher education institutions and sample responses by AACTE stratum

AACTE Stratum	Number of Institutions (type of funding)	Number of Institutions Responding (% of sample)	Mean student population	Mean social studies students per year
Stratum 1	16 (34.0% of population) •1 public; 15 private	12 (75%)	1,604	4.50
Stratum 2	21 (44.7% of population) •4 public; 17 private	18 (85.7%)	3,415	7.10
Stratum 3	10 (21.3% of population) • 9 public; 1 private	10 (100%)	24,005	27.20
Total Population	47 (14 public; 33 private)	40 (85.1%)		11.35

slightly higher percentage of Stratum 3 institutions and a slightly lower percentage of Stratum 1 institutions, the program distribution in Ohio is comparable to that in such states as Michigan, Illinois, and Colorado. This incongruity may call into question the generalizablity of results to other states or populations. However, the researchers believed that, while not completely representative of the composition of teacher education institutions nation-wide, the Ohio population was nonetheless

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comparable in two important respects: (a) the Ohio population did represent a high degree of variation across the stratum (Ohio has large percentages of institutions at all three strata) and (b) by far the greatest percentage (and largest absolute numbers) of pre-service social studies students were attending Stratum 3 institutions, as is the case nation-wide.

Procedures

The instrument was mailed to each of the 47 institutions of higher education that offered secondary social studies certification programs in Ohio. Each mailing contained a self-addressed stamped envelope for use in returning the questionnaire and a brief cover letter addressed to each institution's respective dean, director, or chair. In this cover letter, the researchers requested that the questionnaire be forwarded to the instructor responsible (at the time of the survey) for teaching the secondary social studies methods course or, in lieu of a specific secondary social studies methods course, to the instructor responsible for teaching the general secondary methods course. The researchers gave each dean, director, or chair the option to duplicate the questionnaire if the institution had, at the time of the survey, more than one person responsible for teaching methods courses that secondary social studies pre-service students would be required to take. In only one case did the researchers receive more than one questionnaire from an institution (one institution returned two questionnaires).

The cover letter also stated that the questionnaire was anonymous and was to be used only in a research project about media literacy. A follow-up mailing designed to secure responses from non-respondents was conducted approximately one month after the initial mailing. In all, 40 (with a total of 41 responses) of the 47 institutions surveyed responded (an 85.1% institutional response rate).

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Data from the questionnaires were coded across each of the ten competencies and for each of the demographic variables. These data were then summarized using descriptive statistics to determine which of the key competencies were mentioned most frequently as important and which competencies were taught most frequently. Data were analyzed further using correlation analysis to determine if a relationship existed between the key competencies identified as important or taught explicitly and the demographic variables. Finally, non-parametric statistical analysis was employed to determine if an association existed between a respondent's identification of a key competency as important to his or her definition of media literacy and whether that competency was explicitly taught in the respondent's methods classes.

Results

Descriptive Summaries

The sample for this study consisted of teacher educators from each of the forty-seven institutions that offered certification programs in secondary social studies education in the state of Ohio. Table 3 summarizes demographic variable data for these institutions. These data indicated wide variation across programs for many of the demographic variables.

While the majority of the respondents possessed a terminal degree (Ph.D, Ed.D. or both), a small percentage held a Master's or a Bachelor's degree. Age of instructor was evenly distributed with the mean age being slightly over 51 (SD=7.08).

More than two-thirds of the methods courses taught at respondent's institutions were of semester-length and more than two-thirds of the methods courses were of the general or generic type. These courses met for an average of 4.15 hours per week (SD=2.25), although the clear majority of these courses met between two and three hours per week. These data also indicated a wide variance in number

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Table 3

Summaries of Demographic Variables (n=41)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage of Respondents
Instructor Degree		
Bachelors'	1	2.5
Masters'	5	12.2
Ph.D.	21	51.2
Ed.D.	9	22.0
Ph.D. and Ed.D.	1	2.4
Masters (ABD)	3	7.3
No response	1	2.4
Instructor age		
35 - 45	11	26.7
46 - 55	15	36.6
56 +	12	29.3
No response	3	7.3
Type of Course		
Generic methods	28	68.3
Social studies methods	13	31.7
Calendar		
Semester	28	68.3
Quarter	12	29.3
No response	1	2.4
Hours per week		
2.0 - 3.0	23	56.1
4.0 - 6.0	12	29.3
6.0 +	5	12.2
No response	1	2.4
Social studies students in course		
0 - 5	16	39.0
6 - 10	8	19.5
11 - 20	6	14.6
21 - 30	3	7.3
31 - 40	1	2.4
40 +	4	9.8
No response	3	7.3

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of social studies students enrolled (per year) across institutions. Several respondents indicated that enrollment of more than 40 social studies students per year was common. While the average number of social studies students was 14.42 (SD=16.08), the majority of programs had ten or fewer students per year.

Correlation analysis indicated that no significant relationship between the demographic variables and the teaching of the ten competencies existed. These results implied that the degree to which respondents taught any of the key components of media literacy was not contingent upon the type of course (content methods versus general methods), number of hours met per week, type of instructor degree, age of instructor, nor type academic calendar followed.

Defining Media Literacy

Data indicated that nine of the ten key competencies were included by a majority of respondents in their definitions of media literacy (see Table 4). However, respondents also demonstrated wide-ranging and sophisticated conceptualizations of the components of media literacy. These conceptualizations tended to draw on both of the definitional categories outlined earlier: media literacy as technical understanding and media literacy as critical theory.

Teaching Media Literacy

Table 4 reports a rank ordering of the competencies by response percentage. These results implied that respondents judged certain competencies to be more important in defining the concept of media literacy than others. Moreover, the rank ordering of competencies taught by respondents in methods courses indicated that instructors differentiated among the various competencies and seemed more likely to teach those they deemed most important. This result was confirmed by a Spearman rank order correlation analysis which indicated a significant, very substantial, positive relationship between the rank ordering of the competencies

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Table 4

Percentage of respondents identifying key competencies and including in methods courses and Chi-square test of association results (n=41)

Media Literacy Competency	Percentage of respondents: Include competency in definition of media literacy @	Percentage of respondents: Teach competency in methods course	$\chi^{2\#}$
Media Literacy as Technical Understanding			
Ability to use A/V technology to gather data	82.9 (2)	58.5 (2)	3.123
Ability to produce instructional materials through technology	78.0 (3)	51.2 (3)	7.424**
Ability to use technology to present information	92.7 (1)	73.2 (1)	2.e17
Ability to evaluate mass media technically	34.1 (10)	17.1 (10)	16.279**
Knowledge of latest SS comp. software	68.3 (7)	34.1 (5)	9.870**
Media Literacy as Critical Theory			
Ability to uncover hidden assumptions in mass media	61.0 (8)	24.4 (8)	4.682*
Ability to distinguish relevant information in mass media reporting	73.2 (6)	26.8 (7)	5.512*
Ability to determine point of view or bias of mass media production	78.0 (3)	41.5 (4)	4.377*
Ability to distinguish fact and opinion in mass media	78.0 (3)	31.7 (6)	2.259
Ability to determine strength of argument as presented in mass media	58.5 (9)	22.0 (9)	1.759

@Rank order of competencies by percent response in parentheses

#Fisher's Exact Test Chi-square (one-tailed); df = 1

*p<.05

**p<.01

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identified by respondents to define media literacy and those competencies actually taught in methods classes (Spearman $r = .9517$; $p<.01$). These results may be interpreted to mean that, generally speaking, those competencies identified by the highest percentage of respondents as important to the definition of media literacy were likely to be taught by the highest percentage of respondents as well.

The data indicated that, without exception however, the proportion of respondents who felt a particular media literacy competency was part of the definition of media literacy was smaller than the proportion who noted that they explicitly taught that same competency (see Table 4). This inconsistency was evidenced by the fact that only three of the ten competencies were explicitly taught by a majority of respondents in their methods courses.

Analysis indicated that, for six of the ten competencies (see Table 4), there was a significant difference between the proportion of those respondents identifying a competency as important to their conceptualization of media literacy and the proportion of respondents who actually integrated coverage of these competencies into their courses. Put simply, respondents generally, for one reason or another, seemed to say one thing with respect to the key competencies for media literacy, and to do another.

Discussion and Next Steps

Respondents indicated considerable overlap between the two definitional categories of media literacy from which the key competencies were drawn. For example, a majority of respondents in this study identified eight of the ten key competencies when describing the concept of media literacy. Additionally, at least one-third of the respondents identified all ten key competencies when describing the concept. These results indicated that respondents did not distinguish between the two definitional categories when describing the concept of media literacy.

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While the respondents failed to give preeminence to key competencies drawn from either definitional category, one could attempt to develop a "working definition" based on the most frequently identified competencies of media literacy as reported in this study. For instance, if we examine only those competencies recognized as important by at least three-quarters of the survey respondents, five competencies remain, but the results are mixed. Three of the remaining competencies are from media as technical understanding and two from media literacy as critical theory.

Therefore, either the term media literacy meant different things to the different respondents in our study, or the respondents believed media literacy should encompass simultaneously aspects of using technology and of critically analyzing media. In either case, one might begin to question the utility of the term "media literacy." For example, a discussion on the implementation of media literacy first would require the discussants to clarify what, specifically, was meant by such a term. Two individuals may agree that media literacy should be infused throughout a social studies methods course, but their definitions of the term might be quite different. For one instructor, media literacy might mean teaching students how to access the Internet to obtain social studies resources, while to the other instructor it might entail teaching students how to uncover the hidden biases of an argument presented in a political campaign commercial. Both instructors may believe they are discussing the same concept, when, in essence, the two understandings of the concept are quite distinct.

However, while there may be no widely agreed upon definition of media literacy, the study results do provide some data as to the hierarchy of importance of the two definitional categories held by the respondents. Table 4 clearly indicates that "media literacy as technical understanding" was the primary definitional category

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identified by the respondents. Three of the five competencies associated with this definitional category were ranked first, second, or third (a tie), while competencies associated with "media literacy as critical theory" occupied five of the next seven ranked positions.

Regardless of how media literacy was defined, however, it appeared as if few of the key competencies associated with media literacy consistently found their way into the secondary social studies methods course curricula. Only three of the ten key competencies were taught by at least one-half of the respondents (all three of these competencies were associated with media literacy as technical understanding, reinforcing the hierarchy noted earlier). On the other hand, five competencies related to critical theory were identified by between 58.5% and 78.0% of the respondents as defining competencies of media literacy, yet only between 22.0% and 41.5% of the methods instructors included these particular competencies as part of their methods courses.

In summary, two questions were raised from this study which merit further discussion by social studies educators. One question not answered clearly by this study is, "What *is* media literacy?" Here, there is room for disagreement. Can the term media literacy successfully encompass multiple, and sometimes quite divergent, competencies? One could claim that the varying interpretations of media literacy simply serve to provide a rich dialogue concerning how media literacy might be taught. Conversely, one could argue that--similar to the case Barry Beyer (1985) made for the concept of critical thinking --the vague nature of the definition of media literacy lends itself to misinterpretation of the concept.

The incongruity between the respondents' use of key competencies in describing media literacy and their subsequent lack of attention to these same competencies in their courses raises a second, related question: "If one accepts the

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charge stated earlier--that there is a need for social studies educators to cultivate a sense of media literacy in their students--should social studies educators increase the priority given to the teaching of media literacy in social studies methods courses?" The results of this study may cause one to question how much media literacy is taught in these courses at all. Perhaps this lack of attention is the result of the lack of clarity surrounding the concept. In any case, if one may assume that media literacy is an important aspect of democratic citizenship, the responsibility of teaching associated competencies will fall largely to social studies teachers. Will they be prepared to carry out this charge?

The authors wish to reiterate the preliminary nature of this study and to stress that its scope was limited to instructors at those institutions responsible for training preservice secondary social studies teachers in Ohio. Additional studies are needed to investigate further the conceptualization of media literacy among not only secondary social studies methods instructors, but elementary methods instructors and inservice social studies teachers as well. Given the possibility of multiple operational definitions of media literacy noted previously, research is also needed to determine to what extent these media literacy competencies are being taught by both inservice elementary and secondary social studies teachers.

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APPENDIX

Survey Instrument - Media Literacy in Secondary Social Studies

A. Course Information
1. Is the secondary methods course you teach a general methods course or one that is specific to social studies methods?
2. Is your teacher education program on a semester or a quarter system?
3. How many hours per week does your methods course meet?
4. On average, about how many secondary social studies students are enrolled in your methods courses per year?

B. Instructor Information
1. Please indicate your highest degree earned and your major area of study.
2. What sorts of technology do you normally use when teaching your methods course?
3. Age of instructor. _____

C. Media Literacy Information
1. "Media literacy" may be defined in a variety of ways. The following list includes a number of key defining phrases found in the literature on media literacy. From the following list, please check those phrases that best describe your conception of media literacy.

a._____ability to use state of the art audio/visual technology to gather information
b._____ability to produce instructional materials through technology
c. _____ability to use technology to present information
d. _____ability to evaluate technically mass media[1]
e. _____knowledge of latest computer programs related to social studies
f._____ability to uncover hidden assumptions in mass media
g. _____ability to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information in mass media reporting
h. _____ability to determine the point of view or bias of a mass media production
i._____ability to distinguish between fact and opinion in mass media
j. _____ability to determine the strength of an argument as presented in the mass media

2. Of the key, defining phrases you checked above, which do you address in your methods course? Please indicate by the associated letter.

[1]The term "mass media" is defined in this survey as radio, film, television, computer programs, print material and the like that are produced for mass consumption.

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